

Sri Lankan government rejects LTTE proposal to end fighting

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The Sri Lankan government yesterday rejected an offer from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to open the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate and to end military operations in the east of the island. Instead the security forces intensified their shelling and air strikes on LTTE positions, making clear that the “water issue” is just the pretext for a broad military offensive in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

The LTTE announced the proposal after discussions with Norwegian peace envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer who flew to Sri Lanka last Friday in a bid to end the current fighting. Senior LTTE leader S.P. Thamilchelvan offered to open the sluice gate, which lies within LTTE-held territory, if the government stopped its offensive, provided aid to internal refugees displaced by air strikes and dealt with the problems of farmers in the Mavilaru area.

At the press conference on Sunday, Thamilchelvan indicated that the Norwegian envoy had promised to convince Colombo to address these demands within three weeks of the opening of the sluice gate. However, he warned: “The ceasefire is on at the moment, and if the military continues attacks and shelling and makes any more moves, we will consider it as a full scale war.”

The government immediately rejected the offer and issued an ultimatum. Defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told the media: “Water should not be a negotiating tool... We do not want terrorists to come and open the waterway. They must simply allow irrigation engineers to do it, otherwise we will open it anyway.”

The state-owned television channel Rupavahini reported that the military had stepped up its attacks on LTTE positions around Mavilaru, Muttur east and Sampur. Within hours of the LTTE press conference,

an eyewitness told Reuters that the heaviest artillery and multi-barrel rocket barrage for days had been fired from military bases in Trincomalee towards rebel territory.

Officials from the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), including its head Ulf Henricsson, came under fire as they moved towards the Mavilaru area yesterday afternoon to supervise the opening of the sluice gate. The SLMM supervises the increasingly tenuous ceasefire agreement. Foreign minister Mangala Samaraweera had previously assured the Norwegian envoy Hanssen-Bauer that the military would cease its bombardment of the area.

The attack on SLMM officials was not accidental. The government ordered the offensive to capture the sluice gate on July 26 despite LTTE offers to negotiate an end to the water dispute. While claiming to be acting in the interests of thousands of farmers deprived of water, the military has used the opportunity to attack LTTE positions elsewhere in the country. In reality, the government does not want the sluice gate opened because that would end its pretext for seizing LTTE territory in the eastern province.

The government accused the SLMM monitors of flouting protocol and failing to inform authorities that they were accompanying the LTTE. Accusations of SLMM “bias” are not new. For months, President Mahinda Rajapakse has been under pressure from his Sinhala chauvinist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—to dispense with Norwegian facilitators, withdraw from the ceasefire and launch an all out war on the LTTE.

So blatant was the latest military attack that even the SLMM was compelled to declare that the “water issue” was an excuse for another agenda. SLMM chief of staff

Tommy Lekenmyr told the press: “It is quite obvious they are not interested in water. They are interested in something else. We blame this on the government.” According to Lekenmyr, when informed of the LTTE offer, government had retorted: “If you [the SLMM] have any personnel in the area, make sure that they leave because we are starting an operation.”

The government offensive to capture LTTE territory around Mavilaru has already provoked a broader conflict as the LTTE has sought to cut supply routes. Last Wednesday LTTE fighters seized parts of the town of Muttur, which lies between Mavilaru and the port of Trincomalee—a major base for the security forces. The military responded by launching artillery and rocket barrages that devastated much of the predominantly Muslim town, killing at least 30 people and forcing thousands of residents to flee.

According to the *Hindustan Times*, at least 32 LTTE fighters and 40 soldiers died in fierce fighting for control of Muttur. By the weekend, the military claimed to have driven out the LTTE. Speaking yesterday from the town, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakim indicated that there were still areas under LTTE control and that clashes were continuing. He said that 40,000 people had been displaced and were living in makeshift camps in need of urgent assistance.

Following the renewed military assault, LTTE spokesman Thamilchelvan told Reuters last night: “We consider this a declaration of war and strongly condemn the attitude of the government.” He did not rule out further operations against the military if the shelling of LTTE positions continued.

In a bid to quell growing fears of a return to civil war, President Rajapakse appeared on a “meet the masses” program broadcast live on Saturday night on state and private television channels. While attempting to keep up the façade of being a man of peace, the president reiterated that the military would continue its operation to take control of the Mavilaru sluice gate, which he again claimed was purely for humanitarian reasons.

The attack on the SLMM monitors and the refusal to negotiate with the LTTE makes clear that the government has not the slightest interest in the impoverished farmers downstream of the sluice gate. In fact, the government has no answer to the economic and social crisis that is leading to rising levels of

poverty and unemployment throughout the country. That is why since coming to office last November, Rajapakse encouraged the military to take an aggressive stance and is now plunging the country back to war.

While Rajapakse is cautious about openly advocating war, his political allies in the JVP have no such compunction. At a press conference in Colombo yesterday, JVP leaders declared once again that the “defeat of terrorism” was the main task facing the government and the country. The “defeat of the terrorism” means nothing less than restarting a full-scale civil war that has already cost at least 65,000 lives over the last two decades.

The escalating conflict has already been a disaster for people in the North and East. Hundreds have been killed since last November and tens of thousands have been forced to leave their homes. According to a recent UN report, about 5,600 people have fled to southern India, while an estimated 312,000 people, mostly Tamils, have been internally displaced. The government’s determination to press ahead with its latest “humanitarian” offensive is a sharp warning that far worse is to come.



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